**News Releases**
**Government of Newfoundland and Labrador - Canada**



Newfoundland Labrador

May 20, 1997
(Justice)

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*The following statement was issued today by Chris Decker, Minister of Justice and Attorney General. It was also read in the House of Assembly:*

Certain members of the Roman Catholic and Pentecostal denominations, with the support of the Roman Catholic archbishop and bishops, and the Pentecostal Assemblies of Newfoundland and Labrador have commenced a court action against government and the school boards of all 10 districts in the province.

Broadly stated, the court action attacks the validity of the amendments to the Schools Act passed by the legislature of the province in December 1996, as well as the validity of the school boards as presently constituted and any designations made which adversely affect any Roman Catholic or Pentecostal school in the province.

They have asked the court to grant an injunction that would essentially stop the education reform process which is currently underway.

Over five years ago, in March of 1992, government received the Report of the Royal Commission on Education "Our Children, Our Future". This report recommended the reorganization of the primary, elementary, and secondary education system in Newfoundland and Labrador to permit government to administer the system in an efficient manner. The commission proposed the creation of a single interdenominational school system encompassing the four separate denominational systems currently in operation.

Since then government has been attempting to restructure the education system of the province along the lines recommended in that report. Because certain religious denominations held constitutionally protected rights dating back to the Terms of Union of Newfoundland with Canada in 1949, restructuring could not be carried out without either church consent, constitutional change or both. To that end, extensive discussions took place with the churches over a period of almost three years beginning in the fall of 1992.

After nearly three years of discussions, government and the denominational representatives were not successful in reaching agreement on a restructured school system. In the fall of 1995, government sought the approval of the people, in a referendum, to amend Term 17 of the Terms of Union of Newfoundland with Canada, in order to proceed with the restructuring plans. That approval was granted by a 55 per cent majority of the votes cast, and the amendment to Term 17 was proclaimed after approval by this House and the Parliament of Canada.

On December 19, 1996, the House of Assembly passed a new Schools Act and a new Education Act and the 10 new interdemoninational school boards assumed responsibility for the administration of schools. The student registration process has been completed throughout the province for the next school year. School boards summarized the information contained on the student registration forms and identified the numbers of students whose parents prefer that they attend uni-denominational schools. All school boards have been advised of their teacher allocations for the 1997/98 school year. Educational planning for the consolidation of schools and designations for 9 of 10 boards has been completed.

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After overcoming many obstacles, education reform is well underway in Newfoundland and Labrador. Any action which would impede the reform process would negatively impact on the system and cause undue stress to the students.

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador is committed to three principles: The first is that each and every child in this province should have access to the best educational program possible with the tax dollars available; the second is that students of all denominations have a right to religious education, activity and observances in each and every school in the province regardless of its designation; and the third is that where there is a demand for a uni-denominational school which can reasonably and practically be accommodated, that demand should be met.

Government is confident that the Schools Act provides an appropriate and legally correct basis for the implementation of these principles, and is prepared to defend it before the courts.

The school boards will be represented by their own lawyer in this matter. Over the next several days, government will be designating and instructing its legal counsel. The matter is before the court, and it is there that the case must be presented and the arguments made.

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